

BRITISH AIRWAYS

BAHIGHLIFE.COM  
MAY 2011

INSIDE  
Your entertainment  
on demand system  
Page 111

# PALM SPRINGS

Fifty years on from the  
Rat Pack's heyday, the desert  
city is still in fashion

Road-testing India's first  
self-drive holiday  
Chef Tom Aikens in St Lucia

Plus

John Simpson in Jerusalem  
**London's new hotel scene**  
Viktor & Rolf on Amsterdam



WIN  
A FOUR-NIGHT TRIP



# PALM SPRINGS ETERNAL

Fifty years ago, Frank Sinatra was leader of the Rat Pack and his base was a small town in California. **Shawn Levy** recalls an unforgettable time in US history – and the place that was the backdrop for it. Plus we celebrate this season's Springs look. Photography by **Kate Martin**

**I**t was November 1961, and Frank Sinatra was king of the world: America's top recording, movie and nightclub star, owner of film and record companies and casinos, confidant of powerful politicians and gangsters, squire to the world's most desirable women, and enthroned among a band of cronies – the famed Rat Pack – with whom he could work and party and make global headlines.

And he was livid. He had just heard from Peter Lawford, the English actor and Rat Packer who had married into the Kennedy clan, that President John F Kennedy would not, as had previously been arranged, be spending a few days at Sinatra's 2½-acre Palm Springs estate.

Lawford had been instructed by the President and his brother Robert, the Attorney General, to tell Sinatra that the desert compound had been deemed insufficiently secure for a presidential visit. (The real story was murkier: the FBI had discovered that a mistress of the President's was also dating a Chicago crime boss who had recently stayed at Sinatra's – and that Sinatra had introduced her to both men.)

Sinatra had spent months planning for Kennedy's visit: he had built cottages on the Palm Springs property to house the President's staff and security; he had installed a complex telephone system, a helipad

and a massive flag pole. He had gone so far as to slap a plaque on the house declaring that JFK had slept there.

Now, the cruel news delivered, he vented his fury by smashing a sledge hammer into the concrete slab on which the President's helicopter had been meant to land. When he finally exhausted himself, he was lost in a snit for weeks.

That spectacular blow-up wasn't the only time Sinatra lost his head in Palm Springs. He arrived in the town in 1947 with his first wife, Nancy, and their three children, building a stylish, low-slung Desert Modern house, which was christened Twin Palms. That marriage soon ended, and Sinatra spent a great deal of time in The Springs, as it was known, with his second missus, Ava Gardner. The pair famously drank like fish and fought like devils: Sinatra's press agents made more than one trip to Palm Springs to smooth over some scene their clients had created, and a

bathroom sink at Twin Palms still sports, it's said, a fracture from the time when Sinatra hurled a Champagne bottle at his bride.

After that tumultuous marriage ended, Sinatra sold Twin Palms and began to build his compound at the Tamarisk Country Club, the refuge in which, for the rest of his life, he would escape the workaday grind and night-time hustle of Hollywood and Las Vegas.

When he wasn't blowing his top, Sinatra symbolised something like the acme of the Palm Springs style, a looser, more idle way of life than he and other stars pursued elsewhere. It was open shirts and swimming trunks and sunglasses and midday cocktails by the pool; it was blazing sun and cool, dark interiors, with massive windows revealing dramatic desert landscapes. It was Los Angeles without the movie biz or the tourists, Vegas without the casinos.

And it was tiny. In 1960, Palm Springs had only 13,000 permanent residents, but a remarkable pantheon of celebrities made it a part-time home. Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Marlene Dietrich, Al Jolson and Lana Turner were among the many who regularly repaired to the north end of the Coachella Valley to escape the burden of work and reporters and whatever else might nag them back in the real world. >



Silk blouse, £351, and shorts, £475, both Marni at Selfridges; Cory Tote, £970, Mulberry; Biba platform shoes, £525, Raphael Young; Perspex bangles, stylist's own.



## All-American style

They had favourite restaurants and night spots in Palm Springs, and they golfed, rode horses and threw parties. And the town thrived with their custom: in that post-WWII era of tail-finned cars and sharkskin suits, sleek, angular weekend homes and hotels and restaurants popped up all over Palm Springs like wildflowers after a desert shower. But it was a place for calm, a kind of neutral zone where they could be themselves in peace, and at 120 miles removed from the corner of Hollywood and Vine, just far enough to be a proper getaway.

You might think that stars would feel exposed in such a small town. But by the time Frank and the boys started lighting up the desert sky with their patented brand of ring-a-ding-ding, Palm Springs had already been hosting celebrities for decades. Besides, desert life tends to attract people who want to live on the edge of things and leave worldly silliness such as celebrity behind. If Hollywood big shots wished to liaise or booze or bronze or simply recuperate in their town – and so long as they kept quiet about it – the locals didn't ever seem to mind.

Superficially, Palm Springs resembled Las Vegas, but it bore a very different atmosphere. In Vegas, money (and the gangsters who liked to make it) was the principal concern; Palm Springs was homey. There were people in Vegas to whom even the likes of Sinatra were answerable, and they liked things kept on the lowdown; but in Palm Springs, Sinatra could shut the gate to his estate and create whatever sort of Shangri-La he could imagine. It's no wonder that an errant Don Draper should have found himself enmeshed in a decadent ménage in Palm Springs in a memorable episode of TV's *Mad Men*. Out there in the desert without the distraction of casinos, there was nothing to do but indulge yourself.

That was how it was back in the Rat Pack era, anyway. But with the youthquake of the 60s and 70s, Palm Springs, like so many other places, transformed. Spectacular architecture still thrived – witness architect John Lautner's famed Elrod House, which was built in 1968 and co-stars in the photos on these pages. But the hippie crowd tended to shun the gilded footsteps of old Hollywood stars, the area became better known as a retirement destination than a trysting spot, and Palm Springs, with Sonny Bono, of all people, as its mayor, fell into disfavour with the young and the chic. In time, the city morphed into a place where presidents, ambassadors and one-time starlets spent their last years: fogeyish, tame and bland.

The desert air preserves things wonderfully, though. And when a taste for mid-century architecture, music, fashion, booze and style re-emerged in the mid-90s, much of the Palm Springs of the Rat Pack era still stood, waiting to be rediscovered. The hot, dry climate hadn't changed, after all, and the night still revealed that gorgeous, immense skyscape.

In the past 15 years or so, several hotels from Palm Springs' heyday have been restored to their mid-century glory: the Riviera Palm Springs resort, the Movie Colony, the Del Marcos, and the Orbit Inn among them. Nowadays, you can spend your days poolside at the Horizon, where Marilyn Monroe once vacationed, then dine at Copley's, which used to be Cary Grant's house, and finish with a late-night drink at Melvyn's, a discreet piano bar where Sinatra himself used to commandeer the microphone on occasion.

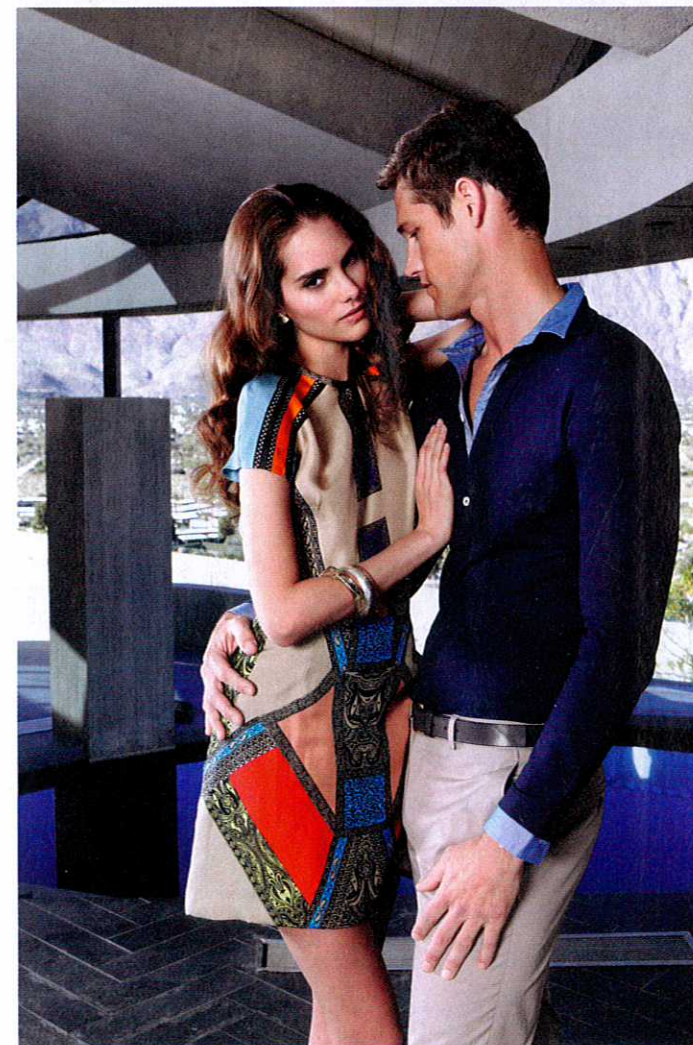
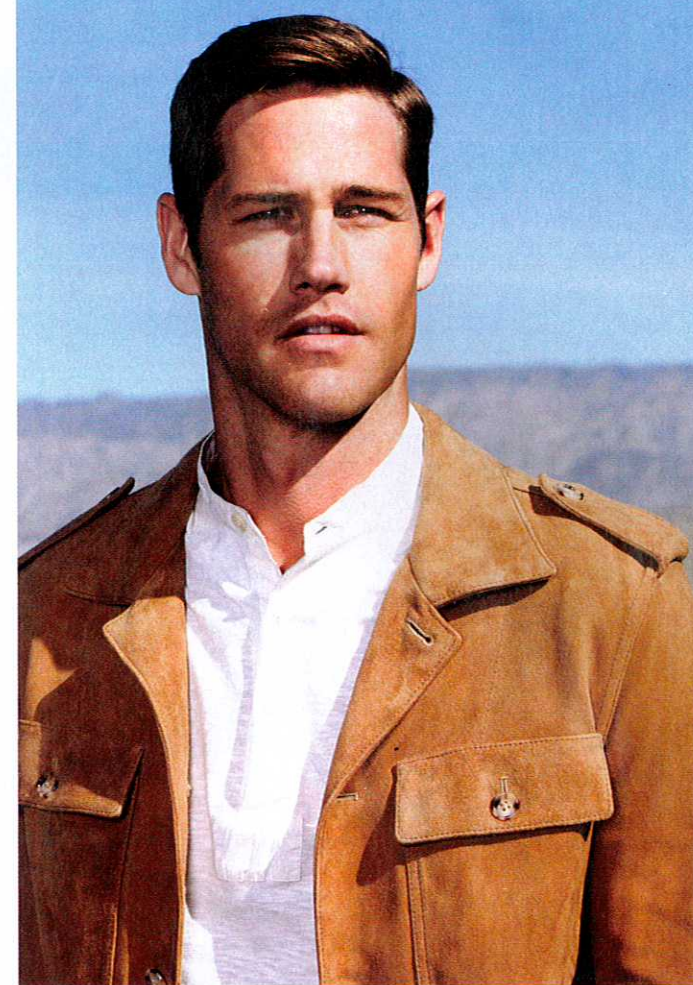
Oh, Sinatra might not recognise some of the more modern sides of the town: there are a few mega-resorts, a thriving gay district, and film and music festivals that annually draw thousands. But if you lie on a chaise lounge in the shade and sip a cold drink beside a pool, you can easily summon the same spirit of place that brought him and previous centuries of travellers to revive themselves in Palm Springs. ■

Shawn Lewis is author of *The Rat Pack* (C400, Pool Art Press).

She wears knit sweater top, £18.50, and skirt, £30.99, both H&M; Jesta leather sandals, £155, Charles David; bangle, £43, BCBG. He wears shirt, £19, and trousers, £25, both H&M; leather belt, £71, Boss; loafers, £265, Tod's; Vintage BR123 Officer watch, £1,700, Bell & Ross.







*Right:* she wears top, £455, and skirt, £455, both Etro; bangles and earrings, stylist's own. He wears layered cardigan, £119, Paul & Joe Homme; trousers, £29.99, H&M; leather belt, £71, Boss.

*Above:* suede jacket, £620, Spurr; Henley cotton T-shirt, £12.99, H&M.

*Left:* nylon and spandex bikini, £155, Michael Kors; sandals, £695, Jimmy Choo; sunglasses, £205, Valentino; bangle, £43, RCBG





Above: dress, £665, Vivienne Westwood Red Label; sandals, £560, Mechante for William Tempest at Harrods; bangles, stylist's own.

Opposite: cotton and silk toile blouse, £899, Yves Saint Laurent; shorts, £350, Chloé at Selfridges; sandals, £520, Nicholas Kirkwood for Erdem; sunglasses, £200, Valentino; necklace, stylist's own

Fashion editor: Laury Smith at Opus Beauty. Fashion assistants: Kyle Blackmon and Abisoye Odugbesan. Models: Marina Jamieson at Next New York and Chad Cole at LA Models. Hair: Aaron Light at Celestine. Make-up: Adam de Cruz at Punishment. Photography assistant: Marek Berry. Location: Elrod House, Palm Springs (currently for sale at expointrealty.com). The team stayed at: Riviera Palm Springs hotel (psriviera.com).

British Airways flies to Los Angeles from London Heathrow. Visit [ba.com](http://ba.com). A seven-day fly-drive to LA with BA costs from £595pp including flights and Avis car hire\*. Stay at Riviera Palm Springs hotel with BA for £35pppn. Contact [ba.com/california](http://ba.com/california) or +44(0)844 493 0758.



Based on June 2011 fares. Subject to availability. Book on two sharing and includes all UK taxes. Stylists: BCBG (bcbg.com); Bell & Ross (bellross.com); Boies (hugoboss.com); Chanel (chanel.com); Charles David (charlesdavid.com); Etro (etro.it);